Stock — Gothic

19804/c [Arundel Soc]
588/AE/-

THE

Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian,

PAINTED IN FRESCO BY

PIETRO PERUGINO,

IN THE CHAPEL OF THE SAINT, AT PANICALE.

ON one of the wooded hills rising above the lake of Perugia stands the small town of Panicale. Its half-ruined walls and towers show that it was a fortified post of some importance during the middle ages. Away from the high roads leading to the principal cities of central Italy, it is seldom visited by the traveller, who would scarcely find in it the miserable shelter of an Italian 'osteria.' Yet, like almost every town and hamlet of this favoured land, it contains works of Art such as elsewhere would render a city famous. Outside the walls, on an olive-clad eminence overlooking the town, is a convent of nuns. Attached to it is a chapel dedicated to S. Sebastian. The wall behind its high altar is covered with a fresco representing the martyrdom of the Saint. It is the work, and may be ranked amongst the finest, of a painter who, by his genius, and the influence he exercised upon his great contemporaries, forms an epoch in the history of Art—Pietro Vannucci, or, as he is more commonly called, from the city in which he principally laboured and founded his school, 'Il Perugino.'

This noble work, although mentioned in most lives of the Painter, is unnoticed by his first biographer, Vasari. It has consequently been overlooked, even by those who have made the history of the Art of his period a study. My attention was first called to it by the Count Giancarlo Conestabile, a nobleman of fine taste and extensive knowledge, under the protection of whose ancestors Pietro himself painted, and who still proudly keeps, as the best heir-loom of his family, one of Raphael's earliest and most lovely conceptions, the 'Staffa Madonna.' We rode to Panicale along the borders of the blue lake, through the oak-woods mirrored on its surface, and were hospitably entertained by Signor Mariani, who, as the medical officer of the commune, had lived there for many years.

After examining most of the principal frescoes in central Italy, I was surprised at the condition in which I found this painting. Although the highest development of the genius of the early Italian painters is to be found in their frescoes, of all their works they are those which have unfortunately suffered the most. Usually painted in the side-chapels or behind the principal altars of churches, they have been exposed to many sources of injury. The ill-repaired roof and walls admit the rain and damp. On festivals tawdry hangings are unmercifully nailed over them, the hammer and the ladder each having its share in the process of destruction. Then torches blaze round the shrine and blacken the walls during the sacred ceremonies. But neither the fumes of incense nor the smoke of candles have dimmed this master-piece of the Perugian Painter. The colour is still as bright and transparent as when first laid on the damp plaster, retaining that brilliancy which distinguishes true fresco-painting. The only injury the picture has sustained has

been caused by large nails driven into the wall to suspend a veil with which it has been deemed becoming, as the chapel is attached to a convent, to cover the nude figure of the Saint.

Of the numerous works of Pietro Perugino I scarcely know one that displays to greater advantage the peculiar characteristics of the master, the delicate tenderness of his colouring, the grace, verging on weakness, of his forms, the exquisite purity and sentiment of his heads, the general correctness of his drawing, and his somewhat scattered composition. It has all the best qualities of the Umbrian School, inherited by Pietro from his first instructors in the Art, Benedetto Bonfigli, of Perugia, and Niccolò Alunno, a native of Foligno, whose altar-pieces, remarkable for their glow of colour, and the simple beauty of their holy groups, still adorn the churches in the valley of the Tiber. But in it Pietro shows, at the same time, that he had been imbued with the spirit of that great school which flourished in Florence, and whose teachings he had early sought. It has less of his weakness and mannerism, and more of his strength, than most of his paintings, displaying those qualities which the genius of his immortal pupil at once culled from his works.

The Martyr occupies the centre of the composition, and forms the principal object in it. He is bound to a porphyry column raised on a pedestal. The exquisite proportions of the figure, the admirable delineation of all its parts, show the study devoted by Pietro to the human form. The tender expression of devotion in the upturned head, slightly inclined over the right shoulder, is peculiar to the school, but does not in this instance degenerate into

affectation. The Painter has united in this beautiful figure, without exaggeration, the utmost grace with the deepest religious feeling. A more perfect and touching representation of the Christian Martyr could not be conceived. Wrapped in the contemplation of the holy vision of the Eternal Father, surrounded by Angels and Cherubim floating in the clouds above him, he shows no sense of bodily pain. That the spectator may alone contemplate the divine resignation of the Saint, the instruments of torture are kept as much as possible out of sight. How different this treatment of the subject from that of Pietro's contemporaries and of the earlier painters, who, by violent contortions of the body and countenance, or by a multitude of arrows and streams of blood, sought to represent the physical sufferings of the victim! How different, too, from that of the later masters, who chose a holy theme for mere anatomical display, and to prove their knowledge of the tricks of a school!

Even the executioners seem to have imbibed the spirit of the Christian hero, and to perform their duty with melancholy tenderness. The heads of the archers are of singular beauty and grace—reminding us of Raphael. This resemblance is still further carried out in their attitudes and forms, and in the bright clear colouring.

Two groups of spectators, sketched in that free and graceful manner peculiar to Pietro, occupy the background, and serve to complete the composition.

The scene of the Martyrdom is represented in a magnificent hall. The Painter loved to introduce rich architectural ornaments into his works, and to show that knowledge of perspective which he had

acquired from the greatest master of the science in that age, Pietro della Francesca. An open arcade is remarkable for the elegance of design which Pietro was at that time displaying in the decoration of the cathedral and principal buildings of his adopted city. Between the arches are seen the hills round Panicale and the distant blue lake, a calm, beautiful prospect, well befitting the subject, and rendered with singular tenderness and truth.

On the pedestal supporting the Martyr is inscribed the name of the painter, and on the pilasters of the arcade the date 1505. Pietro was then in the fifty-ninth year of his age. About ten years previously he had settled in Perugia, after his fame had been established by the execution of great works in Florence and in Rome. The city had conferred upon him the right of citizenship, and had even raised him to the dignity of one of its ten 'Priori,' or magistrates. During these ten years he had painted his finest pictures, amongst them the altar-piece for the Certosa of Pavia, now in the National Gallery. In Perugia and the neighbouring towns he decorated the principal buildings and churches. The celebrated frescoes in the 'Cambio,' or Exchange, and the adjoining chapel, were executed in 1500; the Adoration of the Magi at his native place, Citta della Pieve, in 1504. His powers were at their height when he painted the Martyrdom of S. Sebastian at Panicale.

At this time the fame of his school had spread through Italy, and had brought to him his most distinguished scholars, L'Ingegno, Lo Spagna, Tiberio d'Assisi, and many others, whose paintings have been so frequently confounded with those of their master. They aided him in his great undertakings, and rendered them perfect

and complete in their most minute details. Before he executed the fresco at Panicale, Raphael had already left him, and was probably painting at Florence or Siena. Consequently, there are no traces of his pencil in it. It is important to mention this fact, as there are parts of the picture which might otherwise be ascribed to that great painter.

It seemed to me that it would be difficult to find a work more characteristic of Pietro Perugino, uniting more of his best qualities, and therefore more deserving of publication by the Arundel Society, than this fresco. I was fortunate in finding at Perugia a young artist who had made the school of Umbria his study, and who could copy with feeling and truth the productions of its great masters. Signor Mariannecci executed in water-colours, at my request, the drawing from which the lithotint has been copied. The Council of the Arundel Society have deemed it worthy of publication, and I have confided it to them in the hope that it will prove the first of a new series illustrative of the frescoes of Italy, the most noble works of her greatest painters.

It is difficult, in reducing works of this nature within the size required for publication, to convey the full expression of the heads, and those details which render the peculiar feeling of the master. It has been thought advisable, therefore, that the coloured plate should be accompanied by careful outlines which I had commissioned Signor Bartoccini to engrave from tracings made upon the originals; these outlines will afford at the same time materials for study.

There is no record, I believe, of the sum received by Pietro for the Panicale fresco, but there is a curious correspondence still preserved in the archives of Perugia relating to it. From these letters it appears that in the year 1507, or two years after its completion, the people of Panicale sent an emissary to the Painter, requesting him to lend the commune some standards of silk painted with figures, to be carried in the annual procession of the 'Corpus Domini.' Pietro offered to paint fourteen expressly for the festival, on condition that they should be returned unless the balance of eleven florins, owing to him for the fresco of the Martyrdom of S. Sebastian, were previously paid. The Panicalese accepted the offer; and a receipt, dated the 1st of September of the same year, shows that they paid the money and kept the standards. This is an instance, among many that could be cited, of the liberality of a painter whom Vasari accuses of meanness.

Pietro Perugino repeated the subject of the Martyrdom of S. Sebastian more than once, introducing in these repetitions figures from the Panicale fresco. Amongst them may be mentioned a picture on panel, existing in the church of San Francesco de' Conventuali, at Perugia, executed thirteen years later, when age had weakened his powers.

A. H. LAYARD.

PRINTED FOR THE ARUNDEL SOCIETY, 24, OLD BOND STREET.
PUBLICATION OF THE EIGHTH YEAR, 1856.


GETTY CENTER LIBRARY
3 3125 00597 3017